“Making Life’s Nebulous Events Tangible”: Cosmic Wisdom and Unanswerable Mysteries in Frank O’Hara’s “A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island”

Richard A. Maher

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「人生の漠然とした出来事を具体化する」: フランク・オハラの「ファイアーアイランドで太陽と話すことの本当の物語」における宇宙の知恵と答えられない謎

Richard A. Maher

リチャードA.マハー

Niijima Gakuen Junior College
Takasaki, Gunma 370-0068, Japan

Abstract

Via an intimate poetic voice Frank O’Hara’s canon inspires others to pay attention to the world around them and their internal selves. Meditations about the mundane become jumping-off points for deeper exploration into the realm of mind and spirit, providing opportunities for careful contemplation and personal growth. Via a fantastic conversation with the luminary, his poem, “A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island,” prompts profound contemplation about the self and the nature of our existence that fuses the human condition with the artifice of language. Through a close reading of the poem along with an examination of other verse and prose, this paper explores O’Hara’s understanding of the here and now, self-reflection, artistic creation, and what it means to be human. A receptive mindset welcomes the extraordinary adventure, which emphasizes self-confidence, perseverance, embracing experience, and the significance of keeping an open mind. The episode shines a light in the darkness that not only becomes a personal catharsis for the speaker but which inspires the reader to ponder her own life and the existential nature of the universe.

要　　旨

内的な詩の声を通して、フランク・オハラの作品群は、他の人たちに周囲の世界と彼らの内面に注意を向けるように促す。世俗の事柄についての瞑想は、心と精神の領域へのより深い探求のための出発点になり、注意深い熟考と個人的な成長の機会を提供する。太陽との素晴らしい会話を通して、彼の詩「ファイアーア

イランドで太陽と話すことの本当の物語」は、人間の状態と言語の技巧を融合させる自己と存在の性質についての深い熟考を促す作品である。この論文は、詩を読み解くことにより、他の詩や散文作品を調べたりすることと合わせ、オハラの今ここでの理解、内省、芸術的創造、そして人間であることの意味を探る。感受性に富む彼の思考は、自信、忍耐力、経験を受け入れること、そして虚心坦懐であることの重要性を強調する並外れた冒険を歓迎する。挿話は暗闇の中で光を放ち、それは話者の個人的なカタルシスになるだけでなく、読者に彼女自身の人生と宇宙の実存的性質を熟考するように促すのだ。

Shine on you crazy diamond.

– Roger Waters “Shine On You Crazy Diamond”

Ⅰ. The Ageless Dialogue between Poets and the Cosmos

At the core of the human experience is hunger for transcendent reality: the true, the good, those things that shape the arc of our lives and motivate us to forge ahead. This pursuit compels immersive exploration within the disciplines of artistic expression. Each genre illuminates and guides us along the journey of our quest. Among them, poetry whispers the truths of human history: lighting the dark corners of the world and exposing the potential and possibility that exists not solely in dreams but in daily life. Poetry artfully conveys wisdom passed down through the ages eschewing rationality and routine encounters. Its value lies in the capacity to touch the reader: to quicken the heartbeat with joy, flood the soul with sorrow, incite rage, and prompt deep contemplation. Verse encourages meaning-making in our brains and inspires open-minded thinking. Great poetry does all of these and much more. It explores what it means to be human, opening our minds and hearts, connecting us with others, and elevating the human experience.

Frank O’Hara’s prolific canon examines human nature and our place in the world via an intimate poetic voice that sparkles with warm familiarity, making it understandable by all. Yet, delving beneath the surface unveils profound insight about the mysteries of life and the cosmos. Ever mindful, O’Hara desired to create poetry that inspires others to slow down and pay attention to the world around them and their internal selves, thus providing opportunities for careful contemplation and personal growth. He notes in “To the Poem” (*CP* 175): “Let us do

something grand / just this once Something // small and important" (lines 1-3). It is not a one-off, however, meditations about the mundane often become jumping-off points for deeper exploration into the realm of mind and spirit, prompting profound introspection, reflection on relationships, inspiration, and the nature of existence. His poem, "A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island," functions in this fashion, addressing all these and more via a fantastic conversation with the luminary that fuses the human condition with the artifice of language. Looking inward and outward simultaneously, the words "glow with the gold of sunshine" (Hunter, "Ripple"). Through a close reading of "A True Account" along with an examination of other verse and prose, this paper explores Frank O'Hara's understanding of the here and now, introspection, artistic creation, and what it means to be human. O'Hara's receptive mindset welcomes the extraordinary adventure, which emphasizes self-confidence, perseverance, embracing experience, and the significance of keeping an open mind. The episode shines a light in the darkness that not only becomes a personal catharsis for the speaker but which inspires the reader to ponder her own life and the existential nature of the universe.

Before jumping into the minutia of "A True Account," a short discussion about two related poems places it squarely within the larger canon and provides background that illuminates the ageless dialogue between artists and the cosmos. O'Hara, presumably, was familiar with John Donne's "The Sunne Rising": a metaphysical poem about a young lover passionately addressing the sun with larger, divine implications. It and "A True Account" share some features; colloquial language and diction, mundane imagery that deviates from accepted norms – the pastoral poetry of Donne's age and the postwar modernism of the forties and fifties – and an emotional, dramatic buildup culminating in the final lines. Although the initial images of the two poems resemble one another, the similarities end there. Naturally, Donne's verse is more formal. He employs three dizains marked by irregular line length and varied meter, but maintains consistency with regular rhyme scheme (abbacdcdee) and syllabic lines that follow a pattern (8, 4, 10, 10, 8, 8, 10, 10, 10, 10). Such formalism reflects the speaker's boastful arrogance, tinged with indignation and entitlement, which drastically contrasts with "A True Account's" free verse and initial not-quite-awake lethargy. Another disparity: "The Sunne Rising" presents a single point of view – that of the speaker – who foolishly believes the entire universe revolves around he and his lover to whom universal laws do not

apply. Finally, while the wisdom in O'Hara's tale can be applied to relationships, it is unequivocally not a love poem. Linking "A True Account" and "A Sunne Rising" does not provide many similarities, but both pieces acknowledge the existence of a force larger than and distinct from humanity. There is no doubt, however, about its connection with another piece.

O'Hara's esteem for the Russian revolutionary Vladimir Mayakovsky is no secret.[1] "A True Account" is simultaneously an homage and a response to the Futurist poet's 1920 "An Extraordinary Adventure Which Befell Vladimir Mayakovsky In a Summer Cottage," which serves as an appropriate starting point for this discussion. There are, however, a couple of disparities. Foremost, the arrogant speaker's tone in "An Extraordinary Adventure" initially echoes that of Donne's, yet morphs briefly into fear before settling into the comfortable comradery that pervades O'Hara's piece. Second, the Russian speaker brazenly dares the star to visit, but O'Hara's sun intrudes on the slumbering protagonist without being summoned. Finally, unlike Mayakovsky's adventure, O'Hara's sun speaks far more than his speaker. Despite these minor differences, the two lyrics have far more in common.

Along with a plethora of political work, Mayakovsky wrote highly personal poetry. Although the self-assured "I" of his verse is rebellious and loud, it can also be down-to-earth and folksy. O'Hara's voice never rises to the level of the Russian's grandeur, but it too presides as the center of his poetic universe. Also, both bards championed verse that draws inspiration from urban settings – Moscow and New York – yet these two poems take place in rural locales: the mountain valley village of Pushkino and Fire Island, one of the outer barrier islands along the south shore of Long Island. The remote landscapes facilitate the speakers' magical, emotional experiences. Both poems occur in mid-summer when the sun is most powerful, with each speaker mentioning the intensity of its heat. Furthermore, both share long, fantastic titles; Mayakovsky's promises an "extraordinary adventure," that while unbelievable, actually "befell" the speaker. O'Hara's is more direct, but also asserts that his extraordinary tale is "true." Both titles promise transformative, dreamlike episodes that the narratives eventually deliver. Like Donne, O'Hara and Mayakovsky embrace colloquial language. Donne's luminary is silent, but the two Twentieth Century poets personify the sun with common parlance, which after asserting its authority "warms up" to both speakers, turning out to be talkative and friendly ("An Extraordinary Adventure" line 97). Finally, the two fables share common themes:

asserting the importance of art – especially poetry – as a means of illuminating the dark corners of the world, the necessity of self-confidence and perseverance, and the significance of keeping an open mind. The cosmic wisdom imbues both allegories with a fairy tale-like quality, thus endearing them to artists and readers alike. With so many parallels, it becomes impossible to separate "A True Account" from "An Extraordinary Adventure"; O'Hara's tale is not only a tribute to Mayakovsky but a continuation of the canonical supernatural conversation between poets and the cosmos.

Ⅱ. Filtered Through the Poetic Mind

Before proceeding, it is worth touching on the role of literary interpretation and analysis. O'Hara, naturally, was not a fan of critics – what artist is? – although he frequently made value judgments about the literature of others and earned a living accessing visual artists and their work. Interestingly, certain professional critics viewed O'Hara's analysis and criticism as overly subjective. Bertholf and Butterick assert, "Hilton Kramer was particularly critical of O'Hara's book ***Jackson Pollock*** (1959), claiming that the excessive praise and poetic writing spoiled the discussion of the paintings." Nonetheless, it is appropriate to include two comments about literary hermeneutics. The speaker of O'Hara's 1951 "The Critic" (***CP*** 48) paints the poem's subject as "the assassin // of my orchards," imploring her to "be droll, be jolly / and be temperate!" (lines 2-3, 7-8). In addition, explaining his thoughts against penning any clarification of his own work a decade later he notes, "If you cover someone with earth and grass grows, you don't know what they looked like any more. Critical prose makes too much grass grow, and I don't want to help hide my own poems, much less kill them" (***CP*** 510). Bearing these in mind, I shall advance with due temperance. Poetry addresses life's deepest mysteries. I intend to analyze and interpret "A True Account" for the purpose of enriching my own understanding of the text, that of other readers, and, hopefully, come away with an even richer, more complex understanding of existence.

Regarding the role of the poet, O'Hara tends to focus on personal motivations and mechanics, rather than espouse blanket proclamations about the nature of poetry. His "Statement on Poetics" included in Don Allen's ***The New American Poetry*** asserts, "I

am mainly preoccupied with the world as I experience it ... What is happening to me, allowing for lies and exaggerations which I try to avoid, goes into my poems. I don't think my experiences are clarified or made beautiful for myself or anyone else; they are just there in whatever form I can find them" (*CP* 500). Although he dismisses the statement less than two years later as "mistaken, pompous, and quite untrue," and simply "a diary of a particular day," the final bit explicitly strengthens the argument that he writes about personal perceptions as he experiences them (*CP* 511). Since he was able to complete a poem rather quickly when inspired, "A True Account" is likely another example of a one-off experience filtered through the poetic mind. One may dismiss the word "true" in the title as a "lie [or] exaggeration," but O'Hara's companion and longtime friend Joe LeSueur asserts, "I don't doubt that he was awakened by the sun and thought of Mayakovsky and then recorded his own dialogue, partly in tribute to the Russian poet he admired so much, a sort of gloss on Mayakovsky's poem. The account is described as 'true' for good reason, and Frank must have transcribed it right away, on the Royal portable he'd brought with him" (183). Inspiration followed by instantaneous poem-production creates, as Marjorie Perloff notes, "a poetic structure that is always changing, shifting, becoming" (20). Indeed, O'Hara explicitly announces early in his career:

> The only way to be quiet
> is to be quick, so I scare
> you clumsily, or surprise
> you with a stab. ("Poetry" *CP* 49, lines 1-4)

The intention, he continues, is not only to surprise and startle the reader but impress and enlighten as well.

> ... To
> deepen you by my quickness
> and delight as if you
> were logical and proven
> but still be quiet ... (lines 12-16)

"A True Account" reflects such quickness, combined with a playful tone and O'Hara's Surrealist sensibilities, along with the ethereality of reverie one experiences upon awakening. Together these elements congeal into a dreamlike fairy-tale with larger, allegorical implications. Even the location, Fire Island, conjures exotic images and out of the ordinary experiences.

Beginning in the early fifties, O'Hara began spending more time summering in the Hamptons, which was not only a playground for wealthy Manhattanites but boasted an enclave of artists and bohemians as well. Friendships with the abstract expressionists and connections to New York's high society garnered many invitations for summer sojourns filled with sunbathing, swimming, and garden parties. O'Hara often boarded a late Friday afternoon train, returning to the city on Sunday evening, or made longer excursions when time permitted because he was drawn to the beaches and gatherings that stretched late into night. Away from his job at the Museum of Modern Art, he was free to relax and write, gaining inspiration from the landscape, tranquility, and slower pace. In "The Starving Poet" (*CP* 129) he declares, "I must have leisure, for the leisure bears / me upward on the breasts of art" (lines 1-2). One reason "A True Account" appeals to such a large audience is because its informal, leisurely tone evokes memories of laid-back summer vacations. Dated July 10, 1958, but published posthumously ten years later, it was written while O'Hara was staying at Fire Island Pines with Hal Fondren, a friend since their days as roommates at Harvard. Since O'Hara was firmly grounded in New York City, the poem's bucolic setting suggests it be read as a mock pastoral. The sun-sational, morning conversation's lighthearted, comic tone adeptly deflates its serious messages. Moreover, it lacks any explicit environmental, natural directives found in traditional pastorals. And finally, the sun is not symbolic of anything but itself; it does not represent any poetic deity and certainly not any Judeo-Christian notion of God. Seemingly, it is set at Fire Island simply because the experience occurs there; a locale in which the speaker is more easily accessible to the star as it does not "have to slide down / between buildings to get [his] ear" (lines 60-61). Undoubtedly, the poem could not have been written in Manhattan; it draws strength from an exposed landscape that does not obscure the morning sunshine and a relaxed atmosphere that naturally invites inspiration into the speaker's bedroom.

Ⅲ. "Why Aren't you More Attentive?"

The title itself immediately engages the reader. Like Mayakovsky's "An Extraordinary Adventure," it is long – both are eleven words – and unwieldy, thereby setting the stage for the extraordinary dialogue that ensues. The first line

explicitly indicates the poem was written later the same day. The drama begins straightaway when the speaker is rudely awakened by the sun. It is the same fiery orb that initially addresses Mayakovsky's speaker a few decades earlier; audacious, emboldened, and speaking with all of the authority it possesses:

... "Hey! I've been
trying to wake you up for fifteen
minutes. Don't be so rude, you are
only the second poet I've ever chosen
to speak to personally
so why
aren't you more attentive? If I could
burn you through the window I would
to wake you up. I can't hang around
here all day." (lines 2-11)

This is not the gentle light of daybreak, but the full-on, primal radiance of a clear, post-dawn July morning; the star flouting all its power. Despite its bluster, O'Hara personifies the sun with a colloquial voice. In an essay about vernacular voice, Replogle asserts, "in his best poems [O'Hara] was a first-rate vernacular poet, and sometimes he was that ***completely*** vernacular poet the tradition hadn't produced before" (149). "A True Account" fully embraces the language and rhythms of ordinary discourse, making it accessible and understandable by everyone. Hewing to Ginsberg's belief, "intense fragments of spoken idiom, best," colloquialisms pepper the conversation. Employed for comedy as well as surprise, the reader does not expect an entity with the significance of the sun to speak like a 20th century American. But, it does. The voice is real; its defiant speech rhythm exudes attitude. New Yorkers, known for direct, opinionated, and confident discourse, speak succinctly using loud, expressive tones. The familiarity of the clichéd opening "Hey!" – complete with exclamation mark – and "Don't be so rude" appeal to the contemporary reader's ear from the start, especially an American's, as they simultaneously establish and soften the sun's authority, setting one at ease and compelling her to continue reading. Ruminating on colloquialism, friend and contemporary Kenneth Koch asserts that O'Hara was able to create "a poetic line with more capacity for drama, more flexibility, and more delicacy in rendering nuances of the speaking voice than any I know in modern poetry" (32). The informal

tone quickly counters any lofty notions one may have gleaned from the title. These colloquialisms also instruct how the poem should be read; the sun needs to be voiced with appropriate ***chutzpa***: rapid, brash, and self-aware of its stature. The star continues to assert its authority as the stanza proceeds, threatening to burn the sleepy speaker, but this too is undercut by vernacular wit. The "if I could, I would" lingo not only rings authentic, the musicality of its rhyme pushes the narrative forward and deflates the threat, tempering the sun's initial audacity. O'Hara's sense of humor shines with the playful pun, "I can't hang around / here all day," further softening the pompous tone. It is not until the eleventh line that the speaker finally gets a word in. Obviously not yet awake, likely hungover, and intimidated by the star's brash tone, he meekly apologizes, offering a contrite excuse akin to that of a guilty child. As mentioned above, the tone of O'Hara's speaker is diametrically opposed to that of Donne's and the initial arrogance of Mayakovsky's. Taken aback, the speaker's remorse causes a shift of tone; the pace slows and the sun addresses the rationale behind its visit.

Mechanically, most of the opening thirteen-line stanza consists of lines of seven to nine syllables, with lines 7, 11 and 12 containing no more than five. O'Hara's vernacular style allows the verse to flow freely, and the conspicuous "s" consonance in lines 1-7 and 12-13 along with sporadic "d" consonance tie the stanza together and propel it forward. As there is mostly uniform line length throughout the poem, enjambment and indentation draw particular attention to the shorter lines. Enjambment and eye-catching white space in lines 6 and 7 reflect the syntax of speech. Since punctuation is missing at the end of line 6, the white space induces the reader to pause before continuing on to the radically indented seventh line. Here too, the line break after "why" mimics natural speech and focuses attention on the question: one of the poem's themes. In contrast, the twelfth line's indentation signals a viewpoint shift; the speaker finally finds his voice. Manipulating the spatial arrangement of the text enables O'Hara to slow down and speed up the narrative, not only echoing natural speech but building and releasing dramatic tension, thereby achieving the quickness for which he aimed in the aforementioned "Poetry."

Ⅳ. "I Wouldn't Want a Leaf to Turn from the Sun"

The sun's irritability continues in the second stanza: the poem's longest

with thirty-one lines. However, it is divided into six quasi-stanzas – consisting predominantly of five to ten lines – that are defined by radically indented, short lines, thereby negating the perception of being excessively protracted and propelling the reader forward. For the sake of clarity, I shall proceed incrementally with my analysis, generally adhering to O'Hara's lineation. A brief discussion of O'Hara's usage of proper names is appropriate as he is a well-known name-dropper. Employing "Hal" (Fondren) in the first stanza expresses the importance of friendship and simultaneously verifies the truth of his presence at Fire Island. Moreover, Hal's name helps ground the speaker in reality within the context of the fantastical experience that is unfolding. There are, however, larger implications. Shaw suggests that proper names act as "uneasy hinges between the immediacies of a social situation and the transtemporal effects of poetic languages" (104). Since most readers cannot easily contextualize the name Hal, its obscurity confuses them, echoing the speaker's disorientation upon being awakened suddenly by the cantankerous star. Such a state enables the speaker to transcend the mundane and enter the magical world of adventure. Alternately, it may simply serve the narrative by deflecting any blame the sun casts on the speaker for being rude. Regardless of why Hal's name is used, and I suspect a combination of these, O'Hara operates on multiple levels, and the reader is free to interpret the friend's name as she sees fit or disregard it entirely.

The appearance of Mayakovsky's name, of course, is far more consequential. On the most basic level, it explicitly connects the poem with "An Extraordinary Adventure," at once paying homage to the Russian poet and expanding on his experience. Intentionally or not, naming the Russian also entrenches O'Hara in the canon of poets in the tradition of the Romantics, Whitman, and others that celebrate escape from reality and seek refuge in the personal imagination. O'Hara's insistence that poetry can be about anything, anywhere, and at any time – a break from modernists such as Eliot and Pound and the verse published by staid literary magazines – was almost as revolutionary as Mayakovsky's politics and verse in the late teens. In addition to the literary context, there are also social and historical dimensions. Everyone in the fifties was fully cognizant of the real threats posed by the Soviet Union and the possibility of imminent annihilation, and with such pervasive doom overhanging society many artists sought fantasy as an escape. Perhaps O'Hara attempts to bridge the divide by channeling all of this pent-up energy via a pseudo-dialogue with the near East during the height of the Cold War.[2]

Or maybe "A True Account" is simply his means of escape. Just as significant, O'Hara respected the Russian's capacity to combine and blur the line between the mundane and the fantastic. The American was drawn not only to Mayakovsky's urban sensibilities, but his propensity for complex, epic tales firmly rooted in the poet's persona-centered universe. Like Mayakovsky, O'Hara's verse is peppered with epic apostrophes, mostly involving New York City itself or the rhythms and moods of Manhattan locales (think "Second Avenue" ***CP*** 139-150), but here riffs on the Russian's personification of the luminary. Not to be minimized, love for Hollywood and ballet along with his own drama writing experiences attracted him to the Russian's often over-the-top theatrical verse. Yet Mayakovsky employs a soft touch too; amid all of the bluster, a pervasive self-deprecatory sense of humor undercuts uncomfortable didacticism and moralizing. Shaw asserts, "O'Hara uses Mayakovsky as a sort of bridge between a relatively private world of desire ... and a public world of either monumental or modernist architecture" (124). Mayakovsky serves as O'Hara's primary muse in "A True Account," endowing him with a poetic structure that permits freedom to fuse reality with the mythic world of the fantastic. O'Hara's speaker transcends his temporal state and enters into an ambitious adventure with universal implications. Clearly, referencing the Russian increases the poem's breadth, and thus, the ways it can be approached and interpreted.

Returning to the second stanza, the sun explicitly contrasts O'Hara's speaker with Mayakovsky, scolding,

> "When I woke up Mayakovsky he was
> a lot more prompt" the Sun said
> petulantly. "Most people are up
> already waiting to see if I'm going
> to put in an appearance." (lines 14-18)

Amidst the poem's colloquialisms, the elevated tone of "petulantly" rings jarringly out of place, and serves as a reminder that the visitor is none less than an entity formed over 4.6 billion years ago rather than a friend or fellow vacationer and, thus, is due special consideration. The abrupt and unexpected juxtaposition keeps the reader on her toes by providing a fresh burst of absurdity that rescues the narrative from descending into an overfamiliar morning conversation. In addition, the word forces the reader to re-evaluate both the sun's ire and the poor excuse offered previously by the speaker. The eight lines that follow contain the speaker's

densest concentration of speech and perceptions.

I tried
to apologize “I missed you yesterday.”
“That’s better” he said. “I didn’t
know you’d come out.” “You may be
wondering why I’ve come so close?”
“Yes” I said beginning to feel hot
wondering if maybe he wasn’t burning me
anyway. (lines 19-26)

Having had a moment to clear away the cobwebs, the speaker’s second apology rings far more convincing – after all, O’Hara was vacationing and stayed up late – although it maintains the same childlike voice. It calls to mind lines in a 1956 piece commemorating the death of an aunt:

When I die, don’t come, I wouldn’t want a leaf
to turn away from the sun – it loves it there.
There’s nothing so spiritual about being happy
But you can’t miss a day of it, because it doesn’t last.
(lines 5-8, “Poem” (And tomorrow morning at 8 o’clock in Springfield, Massachusetts) *CP* 244)

The speaker asserts in the final stanza, “... I was born to dance. / It’s a sacred duty, like being in love with an ape, / and eventually I’ll reach some great conclusion” (lines 9-11). Becoming the leaf, the speaker does not turn away, but engages the star, albeit timidly. As “A True Account” develops, it too reveals the ***carpe diem*** directive that O’Hara ruminated about two years earlier; the “I” at Fire Island is the very same persona, still unwilling to miss an extraordinary experience in hopes of a transcendent awakening. Regarding O’Hara’s “ubiquitous” use of first person, Perloff notes astutely, “the role of the ‘I’ is to respond rather than confess – to observe, to watch, to be attentive to things” (135). The speaker, now in a state of heightened awareness, is jolted back to the present, suddenly conscious of the intense heat, wondering if it is intentional. Such mindfulness displays tacit acknowledgement of the star’s power, providing a direct foil to Donne’s speaker. The image conveys the speaker’s “burning” guilt upon being confronted by the celestial being, but it is undercut by a touch of whimsey akin to the monkey love in “Poem,” albeit far less surrealistic. O’Hara’s humor reveals simple honesty and vulnerability, enabling the

speaker to open himself to experience and jump down the rabbit hole. Now understanding the gravity of the situation, the narrative progresses and becomes more substantial as it inches forward toward potential enlightenment.

Ⅴ. "Just Keep Right On"

Upon sensing the speaker's tonal shift, the sun's manner softens, and it finally comes to the point of the visit. Its first declaration is complementary: the luminary not only claims familiarity with the speaker's work, but admiration as well.

"Frankly I wanted to tell you
I like your poetry. I see a lot
on my rounds and you're okay. You may
not be the greatest thing on earth, but
you're different. Now, I've heard some
say you're crazy, they being excessively
calm themselves to my mind, and other
crazy poets think that you're a boring
reactionary. Not me. (lines 27-35)

Interestingly, while doing graduate work at the University of Michigan eight years earlier, O'Hara playfully prognosticates that his work is appreciated not only by aesthetes but by a far broader audience:

... Over your naked
shoulder the improvising stars
read my poems and flash
them onward to a friend.
("A Pleasant Thought from Whitehead" *CP* 23-24, lines 18-21)

Sadly, such wit can go unaddressed in discussions about O'Hara, but it underlies his canon and is another explanation for "A True Account's" widespread appeal. Imagine the honor of being admired by a celestial body! Likewise, employing his own name infuses the lines with an added touch of whimsy. O'Hara's biographer, Brad Gooch, notes, "Frank, with its direct, flat, smacking sound, appealed to O'Hara's poetic ear, and he loves using it in his poems, either directly and self-dramatizingly ... or punningly" (156). The spunky, self-deprecating humor intensifies the reader's joy, making the poem that much more endearing. Use of colloquialisms such as "the

greatest thing on earth" also prevent the lines from becoming overly sober. With the mood sufficiently lightened, the message becomes more serious, yet retains its comic sensibility.

Despite a prolific output, O'Hara was sensitive about criticism both from his peers and the literary establishment. While it has been noted that he was not obsessed with publication, deep inside creators crave acceptance and he, mostly likely, was no different. He frets about publication in "Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul" (*CP* 327-28):

> I wish I were staying in town and working on my poems
> at Joan's studio for a new book by Grove Press
> which they will probably not print
> but it is good to be several floors up in the dead of night
> wondering whether you are any good or not. (lines 6-10)

Joe LeSueur has dismissed any such notion about Grove Press's publisher, but O'Hara's anxiety is understandable (217). Although he rubbed elbows with segments of Manhattan's high society, contemporary journals considered O'Hara curious and trifling and his work mostly inconsequential. Writing in the *Washington Post* a month after O'Hara's death, John Ashbery recalls the difficult position O'Hara was caught in: "'Too hip for squares and too square for hips,' is a category of oblivion which increasingly threatens any artist who dares to take his own way" (qtd. in Perloff 12). Ginsberg concurs. Recalling the conservative publishing world of the fifties, Ginsberg told Gooch: "I don't think people nowadays realize what a stronghold the notion of stress and accent and stanza had on poetry in what were considered the serious literary magazines" (318). Ginsberg and O'Hara were radically different – both in personality and poetics – yet they shared an aversion to the overly stiff formalism favored by the staid literary establishment dominated by the New Critics. Although his verse found sympathetic ears among some of the San Francisco crowd and the Beats, notably Ginsberg, Corso, and Wieners, others thought it less impressive. At a joint reading with Corso in March 1959, Corso complimented his work, but also hurled homophobic insults: unsurprising to those familiar with the notoriously cantankerous Beat. An altercation with Kerouac at the same event became legendary. Seated in the audience, a drunken Kerouac shouted, "You're ruining American poetry, O'Hara," to which O'Hara quickly retorted, "That's more than you ever did for it" (Gooch 322). Due to Kerouac's continued heckling, O'Hara abruptly

left before the proceedings finished, although they eventually reconciled. Such were O'Hara's relationships with some of his contemporaries. Navigating the poetic landscape of the American fifties could be perilous.

Arriving at one of the poem's major thrusts, the stanza's remaining nine lines caution against dwelling on negative criticism and stress the importance of perseverance. The sun speaks from experience; for centuries it has been denounced by those disgruntled about the weather.

Just keep on
like I do and pay no attention. You'll
find that people always will complain
about the atmosphere, either too hot
or too cold too bright or too dark, days
too short or too long.
If you don't appear
at all one day they think you're lazy
or dead. Just keep right on, I like it. (lines 36-44)

Here the colloquial catalog of gripes – highlighted by the repetition of "too" – rings true. Once again, the orb's clever insight undercuts the content's magnitude with a chuckle; who among us has not wished for better weather? The empowering "relax and be yourself" dictum appeals to us too; undoubtedly, individuality and the freedom to be different strike at the very core of our beliefs. In one sense, the sun is a personification of O'Hara, or at least a part of him. Wearing a coat and tie nine to five notwithstanding, the simple fact of being an out, gay poet was a literal celebration of and exercise in nonconformity. O'Hara is squarely in the Whitmanic tradition, as lines in "To Gottfried Benn" (*CP* 309-10) declare: "poetry's part of yourself," and "an instinct for self-declaration" (lines 6 & 11). The framework of self-celebration directly corresponds with "An Extraordinary Adventure":

"don't worry,
look at things more simply!
And do you think
I find it easy
to shine?
Just try it, if you will! –
You move along,

since move you must;

you move – and shine your eyes out!" (lines 85-93)

Just as the sun shines, the speakers of Mayakovsky and O'Hara shine, as must we all, regardless of what others might think. About a year after "A True Account" O'Hara pens the essay "Personism: A Manifesto" (*CP* 498-99), in which he reasserts the premise of self-assurance: "But how can you really care if anybody gets it, or gets what it means, or if it improves them. Improves them for what?" Taking the idea one step further; he goes on to elucidate that affirmation of the self must extend to the artist's work, which I will touch on momentarily.

Unwavering resolve to one's purpose accompanies the theme of self-confidence. "Keep on" appears in line 36 and resurfaces in the stanza's final line. Sometimes the most consequential life strategy is simply to keep on trucking, or as O'Hara puts it in "Adieu to Norman":

the only thing to do is simply continue

is that simple

yes, it is simple because it is the only thing to do

can you do it

yes, you can because it is the only thing to do. (*CP* 329, lines 29-33)

One perseveres because she must. Here sparse punctuation and the unceasing run-on propel the poem forward, exemplifying the message of persistent progression. Likewise, the syntax and style in lines 36-41 of "A True Account" drive the narrative ahead; the long "a" assonance of "pay," "always," "complain," "days," "they," and "lazy" as well as the long "o" sound of "do," "[y]ou'll," and multiple "toos" move the reader forward, illustrating the luminary's point. The litany of opposites corresponds with life's up and downs. Through it all sunrises and sunsets persist. The sun's *carpe diem* dictum harmonizes with that of Mayakovsky, shepherding us to "shine" and "move along." In an ever-changing world, one really has no choice other than to go with the flow; adapt and carry on, or be left behind. One cannot help but recall "keep calm & carry on": the slogan introduced by the British government in 1939 and repurposed in the early aughts in response to global terrorism. The sentiment is timeless. Kind words about the speaker's forward progress – "I knew it and saw you moving" – provide additional motivation (line 49). Simple allegorical truths such as these afford "A True Account" much of its success; they apply to all ages and backgrounds. Yet, the lessons do not become overly

didactic because of O'Hara's humor. As Libby states succinctly, "his lines tend to fluctuate between comedy and a radiant opening to the world" (254). Notably, the "lazy / or dead" quip does just that; it triggers a smile while simultaneously providing levity.

The long second stanza builds on the foundation established in the first one. With the speaker now more attentive, the sun conducts its master class, not allowing the speaker any opportunity to get a word in. The luminary brings its well-worn maxims alive with a powerful combination of authority, wit, and magic that enrapture the speaker. Willing to accept the initial chiding, the speaker listens carefully as the sun encourages him to shrug off negative criticism and engage in continued practice and self-betterment. Feeling respected and valued, the instructor continues.

Ⅵ. "Oh to Leave a Trace"

More than the others, the brief third and fourth stanzas explicitly touch on the craft of poetry: another important, if understated, motif. Paralleling the aforementioned counsel to ignore critics, the sun continues its spiel, "And don't worry about your lineage / poetic or natural" (lines 45-46). Lines from a contemporary piece shed some light about inspiration and wrestling with form. A snippet from "Ode on Causality" (*CP* 302-03), a piece written over the previous eight weeks and completed just two days earlier, pleads for poetic power: "... make me be distant and imaginative / make my lines as thin as ice, then swell like pythons" (lines 12-13). One wonders what O'Hara worries about; his lines speak volumes, like good verse should, echoing across the ages. Technical mastery and imagination are not mutually exclusive, but a delicate balancing act. Poets and artists are connected to the planet through their feelings, which extend into the cosmos. While "A True Account" maintains poetic form and methodology, it derives its true power from a capacity to touch the reader with constancy, emotional truth, and universal hope, encouraging her to develop a personal vision and sense of uniqueness. Interestingly, the poet heeds the sun's advice, declaring a year later in an essay: "I don't even like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff. You just go on your nerve. ... As for measure and other technical apparatus, that's just common sense" ("Personism" *CP* 498). Rather than worry about the "terrible limitations of poetic style 'as we / know it'" (*CP* 355,

lines 36-37), O'Hara forges ahead on his own. His lines are not based on Olsen's idea of breath, and certainly not restricted by meter, but voiced according to natural speech patterns; "grow[n] by phrases," as Molesworth notes (213). Just as "the Sun shines on / the jungle, you know, on the tundra / the sea, the ghetto" the poet trumpets the voices of New Yorkers, nimbly illustrated by the casual "you know" (lines 46-48).

O'Hara's luminary is that of Mayakovsky, and one of the key takeaways for both poets is the premise that the "work" of the artist is to "shine" a light in the darkness, exposing the potential and possibility that exist not only in dreams but in our daily lives. Acknowledging the speaker's work, the sun continues, noting that not everyone appreciates artistry:

> And now that you
> are making your own days, so to speak,
> even if no one reads you but me
> you won't be depressed. Not
> everyone can look up, even at me. It
> hurts their eyes." (lines 51-56)

As the fiery orb makes days, the poet creates art. When he began writing poetry, O'Hara hoped to make an impact on others. An early journal entry from his junior year at Harvard expresses desire for immortality via artistic creation:

> No matter what, I am romantic enough or sentimental enough to wish to contribute something to life's fabric, to the world's beauty. ... Simply to live does not justify existence, for life is a mere gesture on the surface of the earth, and death a return to that from which we had never been wholly separated; but oh to leave a trace, no matter how faint, of that brief gesture! For someone, some day, may find it beautiful! (qtd. in Gooch 130-31)

Similar passion is found in "Ode: Salute to the French Negro Poets" (*CP* 305), often cited as a companion piece to "A True Account" because it was written at the same location the previous day: "... nothing / inspires us but the love we want upon the frozen face of earth // and utter disparagement turns into praise as generations read the message / of our hearts" (lines 19-22). Both Fire Island poems posit that while poets may go unnoticed or even be denigrated by their contemporaries, they will be celebrated by future generations for revealing the universal truths they discover via personal experience. Like Mayakovsky's luminary – "And do you think

/ I find it easy / to shine? / Just try it, if you will!" (lines 87-90) – O'Hara's also acknowledges that the work of poets is not easy. With this knowledge, poets and artists must forge ahead and continue to shine despite the disapproval of others. At some point, however, O'Hara's thinking alters, but only to a degree. The 1959 "Statement for ***The New American Poetry***" notes, "I don't think of fame or posterity (as Keats so grandly and genuinely did)," but two years he later elucidates "I would like my poetry to be ... a description of the effect other things have had upon me which I in my more day-dreamy moments wish that I could effect in others" (*CP* 500, 510). While dismissing any thirst for Keatsian superstardom, the New Yorker's desire to touch hearts and minds somewhere down the road provides additional motivation to keep at it. Despite such a weighty message, at no point, fortunately, does the discussion of metapoetry feel overbearing; the gravitas of the sun's tutelage lies just below the surface, as exemplified by the thinly-shrouded, playful pun: "Not / everyone can look up." An artisan cannot touch everyone.

Finally able to get another word in, the speaker expresses gratitude: "Oh Sun, I'm so grateful to you!" (line 57). Like a child on Christmas morning, the simple, self-deprecatory voice is wide-eyed, tender, and full of wonder. It is O'Hara, going "on [his] nerve"; writing honestly about the humbling experience of the moment without worrying about what anyone else thinks. The bard shines, penning chatty, clever, and moving verse brimming with spontaneous intensity and charming intimacy that maintains seriousness and purpose. As an exercise in witty, imaginative thinking imbued with meaning, "A True Account" embodies these ideals, transforming into a creative artifact.

Ⅶ. "Look Up" and "Always Embrace"

The sun delivers its parting message in the penultimate stanza, which is broken into three quasi-stanzas. Much of it expands on what has been imparted thus far. At first, the speaker is cautioned about spending too much time in the city:

... It's
easier for me to speak to you out
here. I don't have to slide down
between buildings to get your ear.
I know you love Manhattan, but

you ought to look up more often. (lines 58-63)

The New York School, of which O'Hara is an indispensable member, is an unfortunate misnomer as it applies to poets with disparate styles whose connection with New York City can be tenuous. However, it aptly suits O'Hara. Unlike his predecessors Whitman and Williams, who openly embraced the natural world, O'Hara is firmly linked with Manhattan. Three years after arriving, he boldly trumpets, "One need never leave the confines of New York to get all the greenery one wishes – I can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy, or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally *regret* life" (*CP* 197). It is a love affair that pervades his work and never fades. He affirms this passion ten years later in "Walking" (*CP* 476-77): "New York / greater than the Rocky Mountains" (lines 32-33). The city is the center of his universe. Counseling the speaker to "look up more," the sun warns against becoming like those mentioned in the previous stanza who cannot. Indeed, it challenges the notion that urban living eclipses country life. Continuing, the luminary champions the quest for enlightenment:

And

always embrace things, people earth
sky stars, as I do, freely and with
the appropriate sense of space. That
is your inclination, known in the heavens
and you should follow it to hell, if
necessary, which I doubt. (lines 64-70).

Despite tussles with Kerouac, lines 65-70 echo the one of the Beat writer's "Essentials": "submissive to everything, open listening" (483). O'Hara was not only receptive to this directive, but espoused it, declaring in "My Heart" (*CP* 231): "my poetry is open" (line 15). His "I do this I do that" poems are more than simpleminded catalogs of city happenings; they actively record the poet's perceptions as he moves through the urban environment, taking everything in, totally open to all of the events and his experiences of them. O'Hara immerses himself into the "space" of the city; the chatter, neon signs, stench, cacophony, and newspaper headlines enrich his work with lightness and motion that reflect the controlled chaos of urban living. At its best, O'Hara's canon is the very embodiment of the sun's message. The bard "goes on [his] nerve," embracing life and never forgetting its transience. Although

much of his work is inspired by Manhattan, "A True Account" can be read as an attempt "to look up" and bathe in the mysteries of the natural world.

The "follow it to hell" directive is thought-provoking because it can be interpreted in several ways. Some analyses view the line as an omen of O'Hara's death, but that strikes me as overly presumptuous considering the context. There are other approaches to demystify it. Certainly, it exemplifies the gritty, street-smart vernacular of New York. Championing determination and sticking to one's guns, the phrase epitomizes the sun's counsel. The line also recalls "To Hell with It" (*CP* 275-77), which laments loss and sentimentality, but ultimately advocates determination to transcend the pain of existence via all-out devotion to the craft of poetry. The phrase invokes two lines in Mayakovsky's poem as well. In the first, the enraged speaker, before inviting the luminary to tea, entertains the idea that it returns to hell each evening: "stop crawling into that hellhole!" (line 29). The nightly disappearing act, literally a retreat into disorder, can be read as abandonment, escape from reality, and the symbolic nature of darkness. The second instance, however, with its with positivity and empowerment, is more precisely what O'Hara suggests: "shine – / and to hell with everything else!" (lines 127-28). The speaker – and thus, all poets – must follow his "nerve" at all costs and shine the light of poetry, illuminating the darkness.

The stanza's free verse and colloquial diction mask some of the technical craft, but closer inspection reveals thoughtful sound patterning that helps the lines roll off the tongue. The "hear" / "ear" rhyme is obvious. The "between buildings" consonance projects the image of sun rays creeping down the crevices of Manhattan's urban canyons. The "always embrace" / "space" half rhyme provides a solid rhythmic foundation for the second quasi-stanza's serious message. And "farewell" harmonizes with line 69's "hell," both tying together the stanza and giving it a sense of finality. Such patterning gives the lines a breezy, light quality that evokes the reverie of the moment. As Perloff suggests; "the poem *looks* improvisatory but invites 'the eye [or ear] to travel over the complicated surface exhaustively'" (29). The constant repetition of "I" and "you" throughout the poem's entirety ring especially true of common conversation. The experience is a transcendent one, but it is presented as routine. Interestingly, although O'Hara's "I" almost always refers to the poem's speaker, here the pronoun belongs predominantly to the sun. In this respect, "A True Account" provides a rare

perspective shift in the New Yorker's canon: another example of following his "nerve."

The penultimate stanza's third section essentially wraps up the luminary's visit with two motivational sparks. The sun suggests the two may meet again: "Maybe we'll / speak again in Africa, of which I too / am specially fond …" (lines 71-73). Although O'Hara had never been abroad, his first trip for MOMA was scheduled for the following month. The reference to Africa points to the poem penned the previous day, yet the reader wonders if the dark continent signifies something greater. Perhaps it is meant to encourage the speaker to extend his interests to locales further afield than Europe. Secondly, the star promises a gift: "... Go back to sleep now / Frank, and I may leave a tiny poem / in that brain of yours as my farewell" (lines 73-75). By embracing the natural world, the bard opens himself to myriads of inspiration. Extraordinary experiences serve as catharses, and the poet channels the sun's brilliance and dispenses its mystical teachings. Amid the auspicious messages, however, the lines contain a foreboding feeling that poets are not autonomous at all but instead vessels of something larger. Shamans, seers, and artists have acted as transmitters of cosmic wisdom from the dawn of time, and O'Hara exists as an advocate within the tradition.

Ⅷ. "The Alleged Glory of Unknown"

The final seven-line stanza, in which the sun continues on its day and the speaker returns to his slumber, serves as an epilogue and presents a number of conundrums.

"Sun, don't go!" I was awake
at last. "No, go I must, they're calling
me."
"Who are they?"
Rising he said "Some
day you'll know. They're calling to you
too." Darkly he rose, and then I slept. (lines 76-82)

Emphasized by the enjambment of lines 76-77, the speaker admits to not being completely awake up to this point, indicating he had been in the transitional period between waking and sleeping. Known as the hypnogogic state, this brief time between consciousness and the early stages of sleep is characterized by the mind

meandering between the physical world and hallucinatory imagery. In such a state the brain prepares for sleep by shutting down cognitive functions that effect how we interpret the world. With the mind thus unfiltered, might not it possible to arrive at an awakened realm of consciousness where the speaker can have transcendent experiences? Are these experiences not true? Perhaps he does indeed encounter a trippy personification of the star. Certainly, these questions and hypotheticals provide food for thought and alternate ways of approaching "A True Account." The sun's tone changes as well, becoming cryptic and fleeting, rather than providing the straightforward clarity that pervades the narrative. Mentioned three times, "they" presents a jarring enigma. Leaping out, "Who are they?" commands its own line in the stanza's epicenter (line 79). Such positioning reminds us of the heliocentric nature of our solar system and its importance. While not the exact center, its gravity holds our speck of the universe together just as the speaker's question ignites and drives the stanza, fueling our curiosity. By extension, the question leads us to wider pastures: to the center of our galaxy and the entire nature of the cosmos. Indeed, who are they? The speaker's curiosity not only provokes thought about the mysteries of the unknown, it begs questions about the nature of the human condition and where it is going. Suddenly, the poem takes on extra intrigue, additional significance, and the luminary's arcane response only deepens the mystery. It provides no explanation, but promises that someday all shall be revealed. I interpret the promised data download as hopeful. However, knowing O'Hara would be involved in a fatal traffic accident on a nearby beach eight years later makes the star's final words feel ominous, as if the experience transmitted some kind of clairvoyance to the poet. Alternately, the lines may simply be referencing those who have already passed away; perhaps "they" refers to family members, particularly his father, and friends like Bunny Lang – one of his first muses when he lived in Boston – and Jackson Pollock. Read in this light, the reader is reminded that since pain and mortality are never far off, O'Hara is determined to "keep on"; to affirm life by immersing himself in art, poetry, love, and friendship. The stanza includes both microscopic and macroscopic implications ranging from the personal to the universal. The final line's paradox re-enforces the stanza's foreboding atmosphere, addressing continuity and mortality; the sun will go on, but the speaker shall not. The postlude reflects the sun's earlier teachings about living in the moment, appreciating the now, and the fragility of life, leaving the reader to

ponder the poem's messages and the existential nature of the universe. The closing evokes cosmic wisdom without shying away from the darkness that is part of the human experience.

Once again, colloquialisms soften the serious content, but technical craft enhances its gravity. Sonically, the conspicuous long "o" assonance in the opening two lines resounds in the closing two, providing balance and a spirited bounce. The internal rhyme of "who" and "to you / too" as well as "me," "he," and "ly" help stitch the stanza together, as does the recurring "l" consonance, which carries the reader through the final lines. Visually, the reader's attention is immediately drawn to the break from the poem's fairly regular pattern heretofore. The stanza employs what appears to be a Williamsesque triadic line – the poem's only instance – though it is not one line but a three-word question enveloped by the parts of two separate ideas. Line 78 contains the single, left-flushed "me," which provides thematic and visual contrast to "you" on the extreme right side of line 81. Lines 78 and 79 are end-stopped, thus decelerating the stanza's pace, and the vast amount of white space surrounding the central question prompts the reader to slow down even more, amplifying its importance. The extra white space allows "Who are they?" to dominate the stanza and the reader's psyche. Intriguingly, the star's ascent in line 80 contrasts visually with it being in the final step of the triadic line, although enjambment conveys the motion of the sun continuing on its course, thus picking up the pace and propelling the reader through to the end of the poem. Finally, the incongruity of the final words in the first and last lines – "awake" and "slept" – compounds the stanza's discord and mystery. The push and pull created by the indentation, enjambment, and imagery heighten the stanza's tension and mysticism. Employing deceptively simple language and diction, O'Hara creates a dreamy landscape that lies somewhere between Fire Island and the outer reaches of the cosmos, the familiar and the unknown, leaving the reader to ponder not only the stanza's meaning but that of the entire episode.

Ⅸ. "Making Life's Nebulous Events Tangible"

"A True Account" succeeds so brilliantly because it radiates timeless wisdom along with unanswerable mysteries. Most simply, it encourages contemplation about how we interact with others. The laid-back, humorous conversation immediately

engages the reader, and its speedy, playful dialogue propels her throughout the poem. It does not feel like poetry – certainly not the poetry of academia – but an informal beach house pep talk. Unlike the speakers of Donne and Mayakovsky, the childlike, tranquil acquiescence of O'Hara's persona quickly facilitates a meaningful exchange. The sun and the speaker find they share things in common, putting at ease not only the speaker but the reader as well.

In addition, the poem addresses the way we interpret our experiences. While fantastical, the entire episode is real for the speaker, prompting a re-evaluation of human experience. We are spiritual beings in physical bodies having a human experience. The body is a vessel for the soul, receptive to stimuli and experiences that provide feedback and ultimately help the soul on its journey. O'Hara's speaker processes the episode at Fire Island and takes away courage, inspiration, and motivation to continue. In this sense, the experience is genuine and "true" because it catalyzes introspection about personal and professional development and makes a positive, lasting impact. In a similar manner, the reader comes away with new approaches to her own experiences.

Third, the poem considers the way others evaluate us and how we value ourselves. As an entity that has seen it all, the star's words about criticism resonate deeply. It is human nature to crave acceptance, yet it can trigger worrying that prevents us from excelling and living life to its fullest. It is impossible to please everyone, and believing otherwise is futile. At the same time, the poem cautions against excessive self-criticism. Self-doubt only causes anxiety. Instead, self-trust and knowledge gained from experiences empower us to achieve great things. Self-esteem correlates with self-love, which is imperative for the health of the soul on its journey. Success and happiness begin with loving oneself. One of the poem's many strengths is the way the luminary functions as a down-to-earth, motivational speaker, whose constructive feedback and encouragement to "keep on" act as positive reinforcement and energize O'Hara's protagonist. Armed with this knowledge, he is free to "shine."

The luminary also reminds the speaker to open his heart and mind. Conditioning the brain to believe in the self gives rise to receptivity. Open-minded people are intellectually curious, imaginative, creative, and unafraid of complex stimuli. Individuals who embrace openness explore and appreciate aesthetic experiences, seeking possibility in even the most mundane objects and situations. They are in

tune with their feelings and engage in introspection. As the sun notes, O'Hara was such a person: "that / is your inclination" (lines 67-68). His canon fully explores his surroundings and experiences as well as the thoughts and feelings of himself and those around him. His work is the sum of his life: everything he touched and that touched him. This mindfulness permits immersion in fantasy and the imagination. Hence, while "A True Account" differs from a lot of his poetry, it should come as no surprise that he created it.[3] Admiration for Mayakovsky only strengthens the contention. The speaker's receptive mindset leads to welcoming the extraordinary adventure, while candor, humor, and unconventional thinking enable him not only to embrace but share it. Such unguardedness necessitates adopting childlike wonder and vulnerability that allows for the magical revelations and culminates in a transcendent experience.

The poem also touches on the significant role of the creator and the nature of inspiration and creativity. Poets and artists provide the community with joy and inspiration, and also thoughtfully critique our political, economic, and social systems, thereby motivating others to engage in careful contemplation that advances society. Moreover, creators are responsible for unearthing truths of human experience; they illuminate what lies hidden in the shadows, often bringing new ideas to life. Such enormous responsibilities require creators to trust and respect their inner feelings, instincts, and psychic sense about how to express themselves. The luminary preaches the ceaseless pursuit of self-expression regardless of what others may think.

Poetry and art do not follow the path of ration and science, but instead belong to the realm of emotions, sensibilities, and imagination, requiring the creator to open herself to the extraordinary. It is personal and simultaneously universal. Poetry is a vehicle for transmitting human knowledge, experiences, values, and our connections with the natural world. This wisdom shapes the individual, guides the soul on its journey, and awakens the senses by creating beauty via sound and language. Another role of the bard is to provide inspiration and optimism. The speaker's experience becomes a personal catharsis and also, as artistic expression is about connecting with people's emotions, a foundation for the reader's own inspiration. O'Hara's unearthed truths become harbingers of hope in our increasing chaotic and broken world, providing guidance and lifting the spirit. I am reminded of Robert Hunter's lyrics from "Terrapin Station": "Inspiration, move me brightly / light the

song with sense and color, hold away despair." Hunter's lines are actualized in "O'Hara's account. The star's visit restores the speaker's spirit by focusing on positive thoughts, thereby transforming anxiety into gratitude. Likewise, the episode affects the reader. In doing so, the poem becomes immortal, indefinitely inspiring those it touches.

O'Hara has been criticized for being light; however, "A True Account" provides plenty of opportunities for deep contemplation. The experience calls into question the entire nature of reality. What is real? What is true? The poem guides the reader to ponder the validity of magical realms and dreamworlds, and by extension, the nature of the cosmos. It provokes questions about knowledge and the nature of human existence. What kind of beings are we? What do we really know? And what are we capable of truly comprehending? Prompted to contemplate such monumental matters, the reader comes away realizing that she cannot understand everything. Inside all of us is a guiding voice. It tells us the truth, points us in the right direction, and warns us when we stray. Should we really spend precious time worrying about what others think, doubting ourselves and our abilities, questioning the reality of fantastical experiences, or should we be ourselves, embrace experiences, and shine? The answer is clear. Via a cosmic voice, O'Hara instructs that we have but this one life and our time is finite. Immersing ourselves in openness, mindfulness, and gratitude allow for personal growth and infinite expansion into the oneness of the universe.

O'Hara touches on all of these within the lines of an ostensibly simple, two-page chat. The fantastic is revealed via a not-so-ordinary conversation, which nonetheless, is presented as rather unremarkable. Just under the surface, however, lie the quintessential truths of human experience along with more profound questions of existence and the cosmos. "A True Account" manages to pull off a complex allegory almost effortlessly cloaked as a fairy tale, something O'Hara had contemplated for years. In an epistolary poem to Bunny Lang eight years earlier, O'Hara contemplates friendship, experience, and the power of words, asserting that poetry should strive to impart the profound mysteries of existence. Focusing on the mundane can inspire fantastic verse that sparks larger epiphanies, which may not provide every answer but can expand the realms of consciousness:

> ... Our joy will give birth to Word, was
> ever a cycle more magical, angels, meant

more? Again we'll be free to puzzle the event
but we'll pay respect to the alleged glory
of Unknown, thought and worded in this Allegory.

("An 18th Century Letter" *CP* 16, lines 20-24)

Read in this light, "A True Account" is the culmination of O'Hara's vision, "deepen[ing]" and "delight[ing]" us (*CP* 49). The poem delves into the "Unknown" via a fantastical experience, providing some answers, but not all. What is more, its cryptic final stanza prods us to contemplate not only the morning episode, but fundamental riddles of existence. It allows that the shadowy, opaque world which we inhabit is not understandable due to the limits of being human. Yet purpose is born not from comprehending life's mysteries but from perseverance, positive interaction with others, embracing experience, and finding inspiration in the ordinary; in short, by thinking and living in accordance with something deeper than ourselves. The speaker finally awakes in the last stanza because the sun has illuminated the landscape of the world and human experience. He now sees things more clearly and grasps something, if only in part, of what lies beyond the scope of his vision. The episode is a revelation, opening the speaker to the truth.

Poetry illuminates and guides. It reveals what we often fail to perceive and reminds us that profound mysteries cannot be reduced solely to linear thought. O'Hara once posited that logic "is always bad for you" (*CP* 498). Fittingly, "A True Account" deviates from rationality and discovers truth within a sunbeam. He finds delight in its pursuit. The inspiration the New Yorker takes away from the experience manifests itself in a gift for the ages: simple words fashioned into a lantern that guides the reader along her journey. Pondering the purpose of verse, he opined:

> It may be that poetry makes life's nebulous events tangible to me and restores their detail; or conversely, that poetry brings forth the intangible quality of incidents which are all too concrete and circumstantial. Or each on specific occasions, or both all the time. (*CP* 500)

"A True Account" not only attempts to simplify the path of human experience, but brilliantly illuminates the way. Indeed, O'Hara accomplishes "something grand ... small and important" to which he aspired earlier in the decade (*CP* 175). While many of life's mysteries lie tantalizingly beyond human comprehension, the poem urges us to slow down and pay attention to ourselves, others, and our surroundings. It calls

us away from the chaos of the modern world, beckoning us to attend to personal relationships and the internal details of our lives, seeing them properly, and in doing so, going forth to shine. Like the fire ball in the sky and Mayakovsky decades before, O'Hara blazes like a beacon. His gift, "A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island," continues to enthrall, enlighten, and inspire by encouraging us to shine so our radiance warms the world.

Notes

[1.] Not only is O'Hara's sprawling "Second Avenue" dedicated to Mayakovsky, but the Russian's voice echoes throughout its twelve pages. There is also the conspicuously titled "Mayakovsky," actually, four disparate, smaller pieces stitched together – and subsequently titled upon O'Hara's insistence – at the urging of James Schuyler, after noticing a book by the Russian on O'Hara's desk. (*CP* 139, 201, 532-33).

[2.] For an in-depth analysis of O'Hara's admiration of the Cold War Russian author, Boris Pasternak, see Chapter 4, "Combative Names: Mayakovsky and Pasternak in the American 1950s," in Lytle Shaw's ***The Poetics of Coterie.***

[3.] The poet, Kent Johnson, has hypothesized that the poem was not written by O'Hara but by his contemporary, Kenneth Koch, who passed it off as O'Hara's as a loving tribute to his recently-deceased friend. Johnson's ***A Question Mark Above the Sun*** offers an intriguing, humorous – and arguably, controversial – explication of his theory and poses questions regarding conventional notions about authorship.

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